

## **Back Again, Back Again: Swords and Teachers**

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

**Abigail, as the intro:** Back Again, Back Again, episode seven: swords and teachers.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

**Ilyaas:** Cassian's sword was just as beautiful as my own, though in a vastly different way. Where mine was flowers and magic and prophecy, his was starlight and sharp edges of promise. Constellations and an etching of what half-looked like the sea ran along his blade, a story of gentle nights and a sky full of promise. *A you're not alone so long as there's sky so much as it was what strange constellations are found here, and how aloof they sit.*

He was, in fact, waiting for me in the clearing with the wildflowers and the Enarbol -- the great tree -- as his note had promised. He had dumped at the base of the tree enough assorted armor to fit half an army, and yet he sat, waiting, against the trunk, his sword balanced across his lap, his eyes closed to the morning air.

I couldn't help but stare. And as he cracked one eye open to see me wide-eyed and open-mouthed at the craftsmanship of his sword, he stood and offered it out to me, deftly swinging the blade around to offer it hilt-first.

I hesitated, reaching out my hand, not knowing if it held the same kind of curses as mine to keep others from touching it. Something that beautiful had to be forsaken to others.

*Are all swords here like that?* I asked, nodding to the blade he held. *Like mine?*

He held the blade out flat and tilted it back and forth as I had, some days earlier, so the engravings caught the light.

*The ones with stories,* he said. *The ancient ones. And --* he chuckled, lightly, at this, *the expensive ones.*

*Is it a...* I hadn't known how to finish that sentence. The fill-in I had been looking for ran vaguely along the lines of a *Rhysean thing*, but I wasn't sure whether or not that would actually clear anything up.

*There's tradition in having one sword from your sixteenth onwards,* he said, *and for it to be made for you, rather than a Someone Unknown, to be purchased at a later date. They say that a blade begins to hold memory, after a life long enough -- and as long as the original owner is --* he hesitated here -- *gone -- the weapon can be passed on for a new sixteenth.*

He shook his head. *It's nonsense -- what swords know, if they know anything -- it's not the point. The point is that when a sword is made, it's made with a story in mind. This is what was thought when the bellows said Cassius Rex.*

And then Cassian shifted his stance, raising the sword in both hands and putting one foot behind the other, like he was squaring up for a fight. Which -- he was. *Are you ready?* He asked, and I nodded, trying to mimic his stance. He walked around to my side and corrected my position with whisper-thin touches, bringing my hands slightly further towards my heart -- less like I was swinging a bat -- so my sword followed. *Is your weight centered?* He asked, and I adjusted, shifting back and forth until I was certain I was.

*Good*, he said, and I smiled. *This is your start. As long as you can find here, you'll be okay.* He took a few steps back, then mirrored me. In slow motion, he swung his sword out and to the right, so it came for my left side. I stepped, shifting my weight, and brought my sword to meet it.

*Stay there*, he asked, and once again came around to adjust my stance. We repeated in this way, him showing me basic attacks and defenses and us going back-and-forth in slow half-battle. Where even at this pace my mind still raced to try and make sure I was performing correctly, Cassian was relaxed, his sword an extension of him, flashing in his grip. He'd done this for years -- that much was obvious. And by the fact that he'd been riding with the soldiers that first day we'd seen each other, this was more than a formality to him -- he knew how to fight, and he'd used the training he'd had.

*Again*, he ordered, *but you attack me, this time.* So I did -- after a hesitation of several seconds, an overthinking that ended with my eyes fixed on the place I was aiming long before I started to move. The steps still felt unnatural to me, my grip rigid and odd, my movements clunky and unsure. He blocked me without a problem, pushing my sword away. *Faster*, Cassian suggested. *Do not stare so long at where you aim to hit.*

I tried again, even more pathetically. Cassian rolled his eyes and came at me, faster than before, and I brought my sword up as quickly as I could to meet his -- and overshot, my blade only catching the tip of his before the weight of his sword slammed into my arm.

I started to bleed. And curse. Cassian's eyes got really wide, and he began apologizing like nothing else, a line of *sorry sorry sorry* that tumbled between Rhysean and English. I tried to laugh so I didn't cry -- with minimal success -- and

hissed as he ripped a strip of linen from his shirt and wrapped it around my arm.

*Sorry sorry sorry*, he continued, *that wasn't my intention I am so sorry* as my fingers grazed over the cut, pain hissing through my teeth and out into the air.

*I'm... gonna sit down*, I mumbled, more than slightly teary at this point, and clunked down against the Enarbol, beside the pile of armor we'd forgotten about.

Cassian performed a long series of impressive swears as he came to the same conclusion I did. *Ilyaas --*

I laughed again and tried not to do that thing where you get bitter over things that're just as much your own fault as the other person's, because I'd forgotten, as well, too entranced by discussions of swords and beautiful things and becoming a Real Fighter, capitalized and emphasized, to think about practicalities like protective equipment. *It's fine. What sort of armor covers your forearm, anyways?* I asked, mostly joking.

*Well --* he said, reluctance tinging the corners of his voice, and I stopped, turned to look at him.

*Cassian?* I prompted. *What sort of armor covers your forearms, anyways?*

This was how I learned about bracers. This was, coincidentally, also the only time I've smacked a prince.

*I think we should stop here, for now*, he said after some minutes, kind of testing the water. I combo grimace-sheepish-nodded, partially because I knew I was making a big fuss over getting injured while playing with swords, partially because I agreed. After sitting for long enough, exhaustion was starting to creep into my limbs, an aftereffect of battle and training, unfamiliar to me.

He found me armor, temporary leather stuff from past girls who'd trained at the castle, with the promise of my own coming soon. Another apology -- and a third, and a fourth, left his lips as we went back inside and he dropped me back at my room, and another came, a mouthed *sorry* as we dined with the kings come evening and his mother asked me what had happened to my arm, now properly wrapped by Rhia -- though she'd done it with quite a bit of eye-rolling and a few comments to be more careful. It was my first time seeing that side of Rhia -- the friend I'd come to know, stepping outside the role she was taught to play as *mestrana de eligida*, teacher of -- me.

The next several weeks were spent much the same way. Cassian woke me up early -- a knock on my door just past dawn and he was gone, running down to the courtyard as he waited for Rhia and I to wake up. The mornings were spent training -- learning how to handle a sword, learning to find comfort in the steps rather than hesitation and stiffness. I could never beat Cassian -- I still gave myself away as I moved, left myself vulnerable and open more times than not. I didn't know how to fix my weak spots before someone else spotted them, and though I ended up with many more bruises, a winning combination of armor and slowly developing reflexes stopped me from embarrassing myself with tears again.

Cassian stuck around, one morning, after his dawn-knock on our door, and I yelped as I pulled it open, not having expected to see a prince sat against the wall. He scrambled to his feet and picked up a box that sat to the other side of him -- and, looking rather proud, stepped inside and laid it on my bed.

He hesitated. *You should open it*, he said, and Rhia, who'd snapped herself into complacency in the presence of a king, joined me at my bed as I undid the twine and pulled the lid off the box.

It was a set of armor -- leather and metal pulled neatly together into something beautiful. And across the top -- at this Cassian tried to look not nearly as impressed with himself as I'm sure he felt -- were a pair of bracers. They were leather, with a plate of silver-y metal the same color as my sword covering the side that didn't lace together. The metal was etched in peonies and lily-of-the-valley, and in the center of each one were similar figures to that on my sword. One suggested a girl, casting out for magic, and the other showed a king, her chin lifted and a crown set on her brow.

I didn't know what to say -- *thank you* seemed so inadequate, but I tried it anyways, and then again, in Rhysean, because they were so clearly a thing of here-beauty that trying to make up for them in English words was wrong. *Gratinoc*. *Gratinoc*, *Cassius Rex*, *gratinoc*. Thank you. Thank you thank you thank you.

He stepped closer, leaning against the headrest of my bed. *I'm afraid these don't come without cost. There's a rebel group in a town, no more than a half a day away -- from what we have been told, they plan to raze it. We leave in the morning. The kings want you to come with me to take care of them.*

I won't lie: fear twisted my stomach. The cut he'd given me had healed in the weeks that had passed, but I was of no hurry to acquire more injuries, and -- what's more -- I was of no hurry to hurt people, either. I wasn't even sure that I could, if my skills were put to the test against anyone who'd held a sword for at least as long as I had.

I was scared of leaving the castle. Of facing the possibility of death, of the thought that others would look to me like they had at the festival night: like they had a vision of me I could never match.

But I didn't say any of this aloud, because Cassian was just as much someone who expected something from me that I didn't quite understand.

*Of course,* is what I responded with, looking to Rhia for comfort, looking to the girls on my new armor for reason. As I tried to convince myself that I would be fine.

He nodded. I didn't know if it was relief or the same apprehension I felt that colored his features. *I'll let them know. Thank you, Ilyaas.*

I nodded in return, walking with him to the door, and tried not to feel as though I were making a horrible mistake.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

**Abigail, as the outro:** Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role no one else can fill. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.

